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ABSTRACT

Teaching moral behavior in schools is particularly difficult today because there is a diversity of standards reflecting the diverse elements of the culture. Even if consensus on morality could be assumed, however, past experience suggests that students would reject much of it, and neither arguing with them nor joining their rebellion is particularly constructive. A totally different way of looking at moral codes has been developed in the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg established two principles: (1) the process of thinking in reaching a moral decision is more important to educationists than the content of the decision; and (2) all people through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood develop through stages of moral decision making. He identified three levels of thinking, within each of which were two stages. The six stages progress from "obedience and punishment orientation" to "conscience or principle orientation." Awareness of the moral content of decision making is an important part of college life; the process should be taught to students and used by faculty in arriving at decisions for the college. (KC)

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Moral decision making - the work of Lawrence Kohlberg

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MORAL DECISION MAKING - THE WORK OF LAWRENCE KOHLBERG

Introduction

The common practice for schools has been to teach moral behaviour by exhortation, precepts and, hopefully by example and modelling. When there was assumed to be near-universal agreement about the code of morality and correct behaviour, then educational institutions could know what they had to do. It is very clear, however, that today there is no such consensus among adults. Among teachers themselves there are conflicting value systems particularly relating to sexual morality, rules relating to obedience, and aggression. Moral codes reflect the diversity of sub-cultures. In a multi-cultural society we should expect divergence on moral questions, and in so far as a root element in all our thinking is that individuals have the responsibility and right to work out things for themselves, we should expect individual divergence within sub-cultures.

Even if we were to assume a consensus on morality, however, past experience suggest that pupils and students would be remarkably resistant to many of the rules in our codes. Widespread rejection of adult moral precepts by the young is historically a very familiar phenomenon, and there is certainly plenty of evidence for it today. One response to this is to get hot under the collar about the decline of morality, another is to identify with the rebellion of youth. Neither seems particularly constructive. A totally different way of looking at moral codes has been developed in the work of Lawrence Kohlberg.

Kohlberg's Basic Approach

Kohlberg argues that the disputes and conflicts we get into when we argue about moral issues, particularly with the young, are caused by our concentration on the content rather than the process by which an individual arrives at a moral decision. If someone is making a moral decision of which we disapprove, for example to cheat in an examination, what is useful to us is not to assess the decision against our own opinion but to examine the kind of thinking that lies behind the decision. This is equally true when an individual makes a moral decision which happens to coincide with our own views. It should be stressed that Kohlberg is not saying that content is never important and that we should only look at process (though he would argue that process is woefully neglected in most circumstances and should be given greater importance). He is saying that as educationists working with the development of moral thinking in young people, we need to work with the processes of thinking, not the content.

Kohlberg argues that moral decision-making follows a staged developmental process not unlike that suggested by Piaget in other conceptual areas. Kohlberg's proposed developmental stages derive from extensive research he carried out in United States, Britain, Turkey, Taiwan and Yucatan. His method was to set up hypothetical moral situations, and ask the respondents to make a decision as to how they would act. He then gave them a list of factors which could have been taken into account by them in arriving at their decision, and they were invited to give a weighting or priority value to these. From this fieldwork Kohlberg was able to identify levels and stages in the development of moral decision-making.

In summary, Kohlberg established two principles.

1. The process of thinking in reaching a moral decision is more important to educationists than the content of the decision.

2. All people through childhood, adolescence and adulthood develop through stages of moral decision-making.

Kohlberg's Stages

Kohlberg identified three levels of thinking, within each of which were two stages.

Level One : Pre-Conventional

At this level, the earliest in our development, the basis of any moral judgements we make is related directly to our physical needs and comforts as these are affected by happenings in the external world.

Within this general cast of thinking there are two stages.

Stage 1. This was labelled the 'Obedience and Punishment Orientation'. Individuals make decisions on the basis of avoiding trouble from those superior in power to them (for the very young child this means almost everyone). Decisions are based on deference to superior power. Thus the child may decide not to steal the jam tarts because he will be shouted at or beaten.

Stage 2. This was labelled the 'Naively Egoistic Orientation'. Individuals make decisions on the basis of satisfying their own needs. If they want a promotion badly, then they will do whatever is needed to get it. This might include 'squaring' other people, 'wheeler-dealing' and in general working on a 'quid pro quo' basis.

Level Two : Conventional

At this second level we advance beyond reference to our own fears, wants, needs and comfort to a consideration of the expectation of others within our social world.

The two stages involved in the response to convention are:

Stage 3. This was labelled the 'Good-boy or girl Orientation'. Individuals in making their decisions are seeking for approval from others by conforming to the expected stereotypes of generally being helpful and considerate - the behaviour that is expected from a nice guy. Thus an individual may decide to keep his or her marriage going for the sake of appearances even though it is personally painful.

Stage 4 which was labelled the 'Authority and Social Order Maintaining Orientation' is somewhat different in that the individual is making decisions on the basis of a code which society expects its members to conform to. The threat behind it is that if the individual does not follow the rules, society will break down. Thus someone might argue that if she did not pay her taxes or if she broke the law by action at Greenham Common, then the whole social fabric is put at risk. The law or code is there to be obeyed.

Level Three : Post-Conventional

At this final level, the individual moves beyond a mere conformity to expectations of others, and works out the basis of a moral code or philosophy for himself or herself.

Within such a consciously thought out set of moral values are two distinct orientations.

Stage 5 which was labelled 'Contractual Legalistic Orientation'. Individuals in making their decisions are aware of the arbitrary, conventional or politically determined status of rules and codes, and seek to work on the underlying contract rather than the surface requirements. Thus as a member of society the individual will accept that there are contractual relationships - a mixture of responsibilities, duties and needs which enable people to live in reasonable harmony. One's own rights need to be balanced with others' rights, freedom to act is balanced with obligation to support others. Kohlberg divided this stage into two parts when he was conducting field research so as to distinguish between formal contractual obligations with society, and the individual's relationship to other individuals or groups within that society. Thus one might choose to oppose theft because it breaks down the essential trust of people who need to live and work together (societal contract), or to support welfare schemes because they enable people to take part in society even when they are in some way disadvantaged (group contract).

Stage 6 which was labelled 'Conscience or Principle Orientation'. Individuals making decisions on this basis do not rely on rules, codes or contracts but have a clearly worked out set of ethical principles which enable them to make choices by reference to the universality and consistency of those principles. Against these principles, they can assess any particular situation and come to their own unique decision. If queried, they can explain the basis of their decision by reference to their beliefs. What this does not imply is a set of rigid rules against which to make decisions. Adherents to various religions may use a set of rules or precepts which they claim are God-given, and judge every situation strictly by these rules. Fundamentalists of all faiths tend to do this, and this is not stage six thinking but stage 4 or even stage 1 thinking. At stage 6, the decision-making does not use rules but works from philosophical, moral or religious values and interprets each situation as a separate activity requiring careful consideration. The outcomes of such activity might seem to demonstrate inconsistency, sometimes obeying the law and sometimes breaking it, sometimes disapproving of an action like theft and sometimes condoning it. When reference is made to individual conscience, onlookers, and particularly representatives of authority, may find the results annoying, contradictory or incomprehensible. Consider, in the light of Kohlberg's sixth stage, the activities of Sara Tisdall, Clive Pontin, the Greenham Common Women, or the Quaker taxes-for-arms refusers.

Commentary on Kohlberg's Stages

Kohlberg claims that each stage represents an advance or development in the level of moral thinking. As in the Piagetian stages, we would not expect the child to be capable of the later levels. There is a developmental process that takes place over the chronology of each individual's life time, and we are only likely to move to any particular level after we have worked through the previous ones.

However, there are some important qualifications to this.

1. Not everyone by any means will reach the developmental level of stage 6. There will be some who will think in that way most of the time, some who do so occasionally, some who hardly ever or never do. This would also be true of the other higher stages. There will be some who never get beyond stages one and two, and could be described as morally immature.

2. Not everyone progresses through the stages in a smooth development. Some of the later stages (3-6) might be jumped, so for example, an individual might never have developed much capacity to make moral decisions in stage 4 thinking but progressed straight to stage 5 and 6.

3. In many decisions we use a combination of stages of thinking. For example, I as a vegetarian am morally opposed to the unnecessary taking of sentient life (stage 6), believe that meat eating dislocates the food economies of the third world (stage 5), am forbidden to eat meat by my religion (stage 4) and in any case believes it does my health some harm (stage 2).

4. No one stage is appropriate all the time. Sometimes working on a quid pro quo basis, or satisfying needs for comfort, or obeying superior force is an appropriate way to respond, even for the person who operates mostly from stage 5 or stage 6 thinking.

5. So what is important is that we are self-aware of the processes that go into our moral decision-making and have enough flexibility to make conscious decisions and reflect on how we operate as moral beings.

Implications for the College

1. Students

We have a responsibility for the education of our students. There have in the past been generalised statements of good intent that part of education concerns the personal, cultural, social, political, moral and physical development of students as well as their training in specific skills. There has been little educational practice, however, in educating or training young people in moral thinking, except anecdotally or via generalised discussion. Any work there has been, and that has been little enough, has not been underpinned by any theoretical or conceptual framework. Kohlberg offers a way of educating young people in the processes of moral decision-making, and moves the focus off the clash of different opinions. Although Kohlberg uses the term 'moral', it can be changed to 'social' or 'political' decision-making if that is more acceptable language for particular audiences. If value judgements are

involved, then Kohlberg's scheme is relevant. Because their thinking is under examination and not their opinions, young (or adult) students are less likely to feel the need to be defensive and lecturers are less likely to contaminate their teaching with their own opinions.

It is sad that none of the major examining boards have incorporated the processes of moral or social decision-making into their objectives or syllabuses, as they have done, for example, with literacy, numeracy, graphicacy and a whole set of 'useful' skills. There has been some pioneer work in one or two colleges - for example, by Kevin Commons in Leicestershire colleges, and the framework of BTEC or even MSC courses does not forbid it, but neither is it in any way encouraged. That seems to me defaulting on our responsibility for the development of young people.

2. College Staff

In the discourse and decision-making there is an opportunity, whatever the level, to use or ignore a moral/ethical frame. Although most staff probably feel on occasions some ethical qualms, few may have any training or facility in thinking of issues in ethical terms. Kohlberg's framework allows discussion to take place with reference to ethics or morality but without making it a matter of the clash of two or more incompatible principles. On any issue, the staff can look at it in terms of the nature of the decision-making rather than the content.

Let us consider some examples. The Academic Board may be considering whether to mount a short money-earning course for a particular firm. Part of the discussion has to be about the economics and practicability of the course, but at some point, whether it is spoken or not, a moral issue might be at stake. For example, the firm may be on the anti-apartheid boycott list, it may have shown racial or sexual discrimination in its practices, its activities might involve a controversial issue such as nuclear defence, factory farming or the disposal of toxic waste. Staff will have different views about the proposed course and whether it is the kind of firm with which the college should be associated. What decision they come to is not the important issue. What matters is that the staff can think as clearly and coolly about the moral as about the financial and practical implications. To be aware of the nature of their moral decision-making would be the sign of a mature staff.

There are many other instances of decisions that could be consciously informed by moral thinking, for example, provision for special needs, the nature of the prospectus, the process of interviewing potential students, the care of the building (does graffiti really matter). The argument is not that moral thinking always ought to prevail over other considerations. It is that it should at least be a conscious part of the dialogue whatever the final outcome. The prospectus and other publicity can be seen simply as a way of persuading people to enrol as students, thus helping to achieve targets, but it can also be seen as a moral contract. Setting priorities against scarce resources between special

needs provision and profit making courses or between lower level and high grade work, may have to come down to finance or some other practical consideration in the end, but the moral issues need to be aired. There are indeed few parts of college life that could not be usefully examined in terms of moral decision-making. Kohlberg's work has very wide relevance and application to the practice of management and managers within the colleges.

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